Sunday before Lent Changing God's world into what He wants it to be.

I would like to tell you about a relative of mine who was a clergyman in the early 19th century. He was not well known in our part of the world, but he was in Cornwall, where he is remembered as a very special Cornishman. There were all kinds of reasons for his being so widely remembered, but the most famous of these is not to do with the state or the county, though he spoke out and struggled for both in political and social affairs, but for the church and its people down in the south west of England, the Cornish Peninsula, to which he devoted most of his life.

R.S. Hawker was Vicar of Morwenstow, a cliff top village looking out over the Bristol Channel, with lovely views of the north Devon Coast, Lundy Island and, on a clear day, the coastline of South Wales. If you have ever been to Bude or the beaches in that part of Cornwall, you may have come across Morwenstow tucked away in a long valley running down to the sea. That is typical of so many Cornish villages. Morwenstow has a lovely church with a barrel roof which many people go there to see. It takes its name from one of the many Cornish saints: Morwenna was a devoted woman whose life was spent in prayer and helping others to live close to our Lord.

The Bishop of Exeter who presented him to the living must have sensed that Hawker was a real man of God, who would make a worthy successor to his patron saint. So, Hawker began a lively and lovely ministry to the people in that parish, and indeed beyond it. His rectory was a typical large house, with a garden which straggled up the cliffs, where he was able to make for himself a kind of shelter in which to read, write, and say his prayers. My grandfather told me that Parson Hawker, as he always referred to him, loved people to ask him to pray for them and their special needs and thanksgivings. And he did this faithfully every day in his den in the cliff garden. That tells us a lot about the man. He had a deep sense of care for people, and they responded to his concern and the faith he shared with them. That's the parish priest's job - and perhaps the most important part of it. They didn't see him as an eccentric. They saw him as a man of God. As indeed he was.

Now, I mentioned earlier that, as Anglicans, we are indebted to him in a special way. I'll tell you why. In the 1830s, there were some bad "back-ends" (autumns) and, as food was short, so the prices went up. Parson Hawker gave his glebe lands to the parish, so that they could increase local food production and sell it at a reasonable price. But alongside that, he instituted our modern harvest festival. He wanted to make his people aware that the food we can produce is blessed, hallowed by God, and that we should look to Him with thanksgiving. Hence, harvest thanksgiving, when we bring produce to the parish church, and decorate the building appropriately, to remind us that we owe so much to God 's providing.  More than that, Hawker persuaded his people to use the first fruits of the harvest, both grain and wine, for the harvest Holy Communion services.

We would say today that Hawker was very much ‘with it’! He was a teacher as well as a preacher. He brought home to his people the reality of God's providing, and our need to express our thanksgiving. Here is the man of God, the priest to the people, bringing them to God, and taking God to them. It's interesting that Hawker's work has spread out into the liturgy of other main churches. Most churches now keep harvest and mark it with special services of one sort or another. All of this was down to Hawker.

Parson Hawker was not just a country parson. He was also very much a priest to the seafaring community. From his den, his outpost on the Morwenstow cliffs, he followed the movement of shipping around the coast or coming from afar. He knew the dangers a couple of hundred yards off- shore – a long jagged reef which, in his time, caught out many a ship which hoped to make shore or shelter in a storm. My father told me that many times, in the middle of a morning service, Hawker's manservant would bring him news that a ship had been wrecked on the rocks below. There was no time to lose. Hawker and some of his congregation would get down to the shore to rescue as many sailors as possible and, at the same time, to recover any of the cargo that they could.

You will see in the churchyard today a great number of graves of sailors who were drowned. Hawker treated them with great respect and arranged their burials, as though they were members of his own family. His congregation followed his example and may have helped by getting information to the sailors’ families. So here is another snapshot of a very caring parson who saw the world as his parish and wanted to lead those he served home to God.

Some of us may already have thought about making Lent a time for coming close to God. Others may still be wondering what to do. Giving things up was the way we used to think about it. I want to suggest to you something more positive. Parson Hawker gives us a clue. Among your many friends and neighbours, there will be those with problems, anxieties, and ill health, or who are just under the weather. They may have told you about their difficulties.

You may have said to them, "I will pray for you," and perhaps you did. I think, however, that the promise to pray for people may often be an expression of genuine concern rather than something practical. I may be quite wrong about this. But I know in conversation we use throw-away expressions, and the promise to pray could be one of them. If, however, we do pray for them, and we offer persistent prayer for them, I know things do happen and those prayers find a response.

Prayer reaches beyond our imaginings and enables God to touch the person for whom we pray. We are holding that person and their difficulty up to God. It is up to Him to decide what an appropriate response is, but we will have done our part in holding him or her in the love and care of God. Words don't need to come into prayer. They may help, but the important thing is to hold that person up to God with the eye of love. That is such a precious, caring, thing to do.

That is what Parson Hawker spent so much of his time doing in his den, in his lookout, in that cliff garden at Morwenstow. His thoughts for his people were his prayers for them. Think about that. Let your thoughts be your prayers for your friends and those who ask for your prayers, or those for whom you promise to pray. That can make this a really wonderful Lent. You will be touching the heart of what Lent is really all about - bringing God close to people and holding them up to Him.  It's the quiet unspoken work of the parish priest. But it's the quiet unspoken word of all faithful Christian people too.

No, it's not easy and it takes time and spiritual effort.

But I urge you today to find the most comfortable, the most friendly way for you to pray, to hold up your friends and those who ask you - to hold them up to God for His help, His healing, His blessing.

You are doing something simple, but yet profound. And what you are doing will be blest by our Lord and have an eternal significance. You will be following in the way of our Lord. That makes for a good Lent. It will give a new meaning to your Christian life. What a change would come about if the whole church followed Parson Hawker’s way of daily prayer. Remember we are all in the business of changing God's world into what He wants it to be. Use this Lent as perhaps you have never used it before and thank God for the changes He will bring about.

“Faithful is He who has called you, who will also do it.”